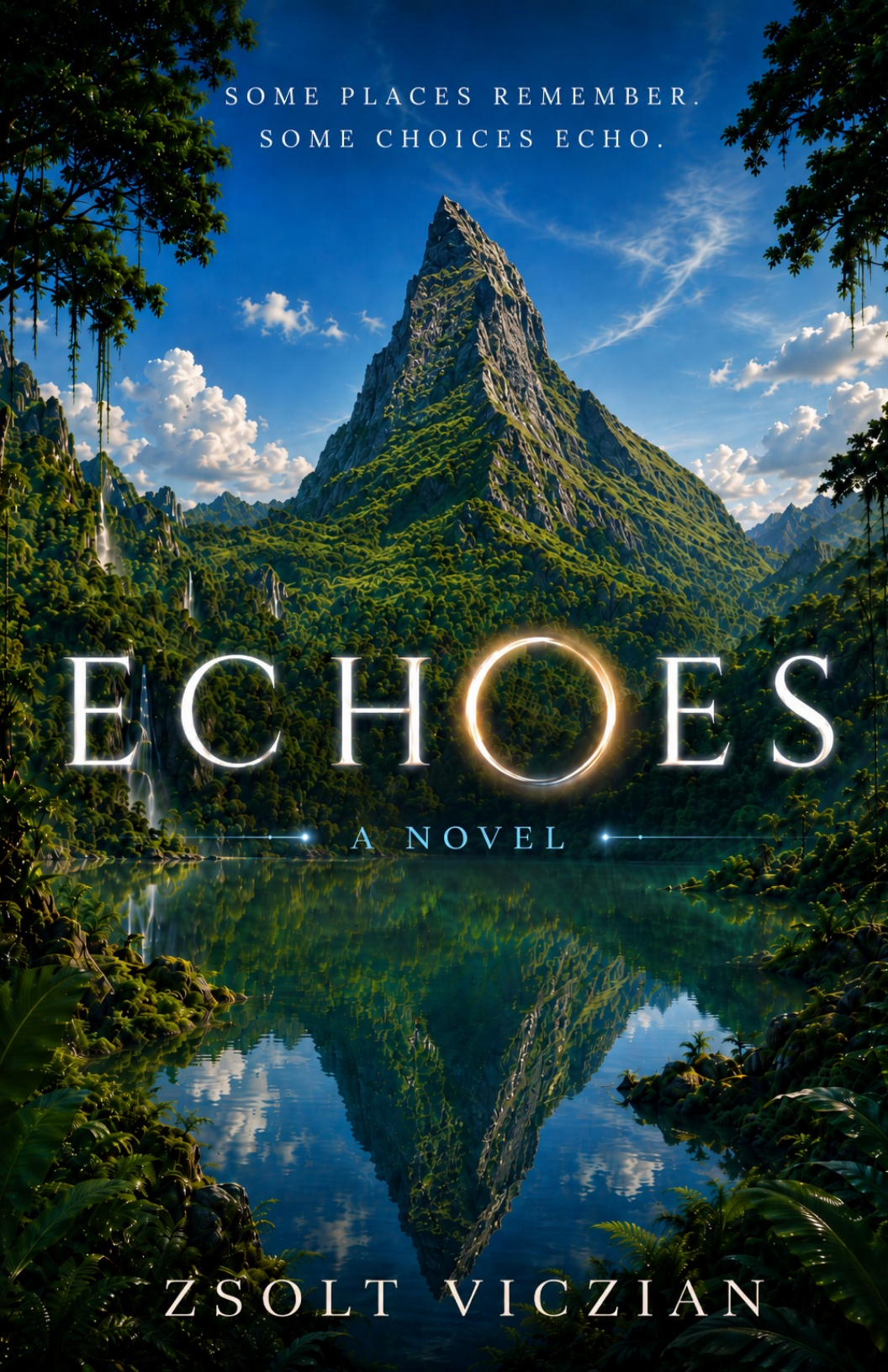




SOME PLACES REMEMBER.
SOME CHOICES ECHO.

ECHOES

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A NOVEL — — — — —

ZSOLT VICZIAN

Chapter 1: Nia

Now, when people ask how I came to the buried curves, I begin with a classroom laughing at an ice line. That was forty-five years ago.

I was still setting out the last sediment tray when the first student tried to read its label upside down.

“You will learn more if you wait,” I told her.

“I’m testing whether you wrote it correctly.”

“Then I suppose the lesson has started.”

By the time the room filled, eleven shallow trays ran along the front bench: rounded stones, pale powder from a lake core, chips of dark rock with scratches across one face, and a strip of red clay split through the middle. None of it looked equal to the dense green landscape outside our windows, where mist hung among trees climbing almost to the gray ridgeline. That was why I used it.

I held up the clay. “This settled at the bottom of a lake.”

The student nearest the window leaned back to see the ridgeline beyond the courtyard trees. “A warm lake?”

“A cold one.”

“How cold?”

“Cold enough that ice remained in the upper valley through every season.”

Two students smiled. A third laughed, then tried to hide it behind her notes.

I drew the valley in section and marked the old ice line. The room laughed properly this time. They knew those slopes. The line swallowed the institute, the lower terraces, and half the mountain they could see from their seats.

I checked my scale.

Then I moved the line higher.

The laughter stopped.

Questions arrived together. How could we know? What had survived? Would the ice have covered this building? A student in the first row guessed a depth so extreme that the smile was already forming on the face beside her.

“What made you choose that figure?” I asked.

She pointed to the width of the valley on my drawing. “If the ice filled the whole basin, the pressure would push it higher at the sides.”

“The number is too large,” I said, “but the reasoning is useful. Keep the reasoning.”

The other student’s smile disappeared into her sleeve.

We moved from the cross-section to the evidence. Scratched bedrock. Foreign boulders carried farther than any river could have rolled them. Ridges left where the ice had paused. Those traces they accepted easily. They were large enough to feel honest.

The clay caused trouble.

I placed it under the reader. The wall behind me filled with magnified grains—light mineral fragments, pores, dark flecks no larger than dust. I set a compass beside the sample and brought a hand magnet close enough to turn the needle.

“Some of those dark grains aligned while the mud settled,” I said. “They recorded the direction of the field at that time.”

“And stayed aligned?”

“Under the right conditions.”

“For how long?”

“Until heat, pressure, water, chemistry, or disturbance gave them a better reason not to.”

That answer annoyed them.

One student asked whether reconstructing the old cold could predict the basin’s next climate shift. I told her it could help only if we separated regional change from local response. Her pen moved faster after that.

The dismissal signal sounded before I had erased the ice line. Chairs scraped back, but students gathered around the trays instead of the door.

The girl who had inspected my label at the start raised her hand again. “How do you know the grains didn’t simply fall that way by chance?”

I looked at the clay, then at her.

“Bring that objection next lesson. We’ll build the test around it.”

Warm rain struck the leaves outside hard enough to be heard through the open window. The class left arguing about coincidence.

Mara had spread the basin-station map across the tea-room table and pinned one wet corner with the cracked green cup. She was down the corridor from the lecture hall, its door still open, close enough to have heard the laughter and the questions that followed it.

"You made them believe you," she said.

"I made them doubt me more precisely."

"That is what you call believing you."

The young man who had brought the bread set it beside the kettle and withdrew. Mara tore off a piece while reading the equipment ledger, scattering crumbs over the map in a shortcut she would have criticized in anyone else. I moved the bread away from the survey route.

We had met seven years earlier by correcting each other in public before lunch. The friendship that survived was useful because Mara remained the person I showed a result to when I wanted the weak part found first.

The southern relay had failed because insects had nested in its housing. The replacement mast had space on the first goods train after dawn. Mara had circled the departure twice and assigned herself the station with the longest carry.

"You have given yourself the bad route."

"I have prevented you from discovering generosity at four in the morning."

"You missed the episode," she said.

"I did not."

"The captain survived the ravine."

"I know."

"So you watched it."

"Twice."

She looked up. "You refuse every social invitation for three weeks and then spend two evenings watching badly equipped fictional researchers cross a collapsing bridge."

"The bridge sequence is structurally sound."

"The bridge falls down."

"Exactly."

My wrist display lit against the table. Tarin had sent a photograph of a half-built reed frame, its upper arc leaning away from the clay basin meant to catch its reflection.

It is making the sound you said woven reed could not make. Also: home before supper? We need to settle the household question.

The frame was easy. I enlarged the image, found the crossed binding pulling one rib against the next, and told him which cord to loosen.

I left the second question unanswered.

Mara tapped the map. "Did you answer him?"

"I answered the frame."

"He must feel cherished."

Tarin's new workshop residency would keep him upriver for several years. We could live apart, move toward my mother's valley, or have him join her household. He had asked for a date. I kept offering conditions.

"Tonight," I said.

Mara folded one edge of the map over the weather table. "You said tonight yesterday."

"Yesterday was poorly chosen."

That earned no laugh.

We finished the equipment list. I booked the cargo space before the schedule could change. The cracked cup left a damp green mark where the route crossed the lower wetland.

Three mornings later we left before dawn.

The western goods line carried field cases only on its first run, before the passenger trains claimed the raised causeway.

Mara slept against the window for twenty minutes, woke before anyone could notice, and denied both events. Orly sat opposite us with the station list on her knees, matching housing numbers to the carts waiting at the far platform. She was new enough to check everything twice and experienced enough to be offended if anyone praised her for it. Her light raincoat closed with two different clasps, one bright from replacement and one dark with wear.

Before the wetlands, the line threaded a town built tightly against the slope, deep-eaved houses stepping above covered lanes and open water channels. Bands of dark solar glass flashed between wet gardens whenever the cloud broke.

The Western Basin opened around us by degrees, low wet country laid over the buried curve: black water in old cuts, reeds holding last year's brown heads above new green, pale islands where willow roots had found enough ground to keep a person from sinking. Red sphagnum spread over the peat like rust. The morning smelled of wet mineral soil and the sweet edge of plants not quite decided whether to rot.

Trains crossed the basin on raised stone and packed-earth beds. Below them, plank walks sometimes ended at ground that had looked reliable in the dry season and had since reconsidered.

At the first station, one cart wheel went through to its axle. Black water rose slowly around the spokes.

Mara looked at the wheel, then at me. "Your route remains excellent."

"It was firm when I marked it."

"That is the kind of historical testimony you warn students about."

We carried the cases the last hundred paces. Mud pulled at our boots; reeds tapped the housings.

At the second site, Orly stopped the senior technician before he tightened the mast.

"It's moving."

The plate looked level. She pressed one corner with two fingers. Water welled around the opposite foot.

"We can pack the low side," he said.

"Then the packing becomes part of the station."

He glanced at me.

"Move it," I said.

We carried the mast thirty paces to a gravel rise barely wide enough for the supports. Orly entered the abandoned position in the log instead of letting the mistake disappear into a cleaner version of the day.

By midday another planned site had been lost to buried infrastructure. Rain crossed the fen as a gray veil, arriving as sound on the water before it touched us.

We hauled the last cases toward a wooded island of birch and alder. Halfway along the planks, the junior technician's boot split. Mara exchanged loads with her before anyone could make the kindness ceremonial.

"You know," she told me, "some field leaders consult weather."

"I did."

"And?"

"It disagreed."

Orly laughed hard enough to catch herself against the rail. For one bright second all three of us were soaked and balancing expensive instruments over black water while the goods train sounded its departure bell above us.

By late afternoon four stations were upright and one planned position remained blank. We missed the return train by four minutes.

I sent Mama a message saying I would reach the household the next afternoon, too late to help prepare the terrace decision as promised.

Orly kept the closed station log on her lap.

"Tomorrow?" she asked.

"Tomorrow."

Outside, low mist gathered over the water. The new stations stood among the reeds, recording without us.

I reached my mother's house the following afternoon, after two changes and the last mile on foot because the household cart was carrying stone. My uncle walked the ox at its head. Low light caught the wet channel wall and the yellow roots my mother grew beneath it. The house had grown around its courtyard since I was a child, new rooms built above old stone without moving the kitchen or the water channel that crossed the yard.

The meal had already begun. Smoke and hot flour reached me at the door. My brother stood at the heated stone turning rounds of dough, flour to his elbows, while my mother and two aunts occupied the table with land records, a slope sketch, and three possible lines for the terrace wall.

"That was deliberate," my brother said without looking up. "She prefers arriving after decisions are already made."

"I prefer decisions supported by evidence."

"Then you came to the wrong table."

My eldest aunt tapped the old wall line. "We rebuild here. The store stays where it is."

"The spill needs to move north first," my brother said from the kitchen. "Water crossed above the western tree. If you rebuild on the old line, it will push the wall out again."

"You saw one storm," my aunt said. "The women who keep the orchard have watched that slope through seasons."

"That storm was the one that moved the wall."

"What did you mark?" I asked.

He brought over a flour-dusted board and stood at the end of the table. Three marks showed the wall's movement over recent high-rain seasons; a fourth traced the runoff.

My aunt asked who had checked them.

"No one," he said. "You postponed the inspection."

My mother broke a yellow root in half and put one piece on my plate.
“Which line?”

“If the spill moved the wall, shifting it may be enough. If the lower fill has loosened, it will not be. The tree may be lifting the stones, but the sequence does not prove that either.”

“We have one wall,” my mother said.

“I can give you a range of risk.”

“Can you give it before the bread burns?”

My brother turned the dough. “No.”

I looked at him. “I was about to.”

“You were about to explain why the question was badly formed.”

He was smiling. I smiled despite myself.

My youngest aunt asked what failed least badly if I was wrong. I pointed to the middle line, farther into the slope with the spill moved north. It cost part of the water store and room around the western tree. It was also the line my brother had drawn before I arrived.

My eldest aunt pressed her thumb to the record. “We rebuild the middle section. The spill goes north. We leave the tree until the next high rain.”

My mother nodded and folded the slope sketch.

My brother set the bread beside me and returned to the heated stone before she had finished. My aunt asked him for the salt; he passed it over without joining the table.

“The bread is good,” I told him.

“That answer was properly formed.”

I ate bread, yellow root gone soft and sweet at the edges, and bitter greens while my aunt wrote the northern spill into the land record.

Outside, water ran through the old stone channel toward the orchard. I followed it as far as the lower gate, then left it to climb toward the lake, chasing what remained of the light before Tarin gave up waiting.

The lake was warmer than the air and cold enough to make the first breath ridiculous.

Tarin went in before I did because he liked watching me argue with it from the bank. He surfaced beyond the launching stone with his hair over his eyes.

“You look persuasive,” I called.

“I am suffering beautifully.”

“That is your profession.”

His new installation occupied the far shallows: thirty knee-high reed frames in a loose curve, thin clay cups woven into them. At dusk the cups emptied through pinholes onto stretched fiber below. By morning the clay would begin to split. Three days later the whole thing would be dismantled.

I had asked why he would spend six weeks making something designed to fail.

He had asked why I spent six years reconstructing ice that no longer existed.

The comparison was wrong in three technical ways and correct in one human one, which made it difficult to dismiss.

I joined him. The shock closed over my shoulders. For a while we swam without speaking, his strokes untidy and strong, mine efficient enough that he accused me of turning pleasure into transport. We crossed under the horn peak's reflection and came back along the reeds.

The first clay cup released its water while we were still twenty paces away. A hollow note carried across the lake. Then a second answered farther down the curve, and a third.

The notes were not a melody. Wind, fill level, and the small errors in every hand-shaped cup had made certainty impossible. The sequence traveled anyway, hesitant and lovely, as if the shore were thinking aloud.

We floated until the last cup emptied.

"Tomorrow it will sound different," he said.

"Tomorrow the inlet may be lower."

"That too."

He was pleased by the correction.

On the flat stone afterward, he wrapped us both in one rough drying cloth and showed me the commission notice from the eastern basin council. A public square, three nights, enough material support to work at a scale he had never been offered before. The opening fell inside my next survey window.

"We can move the field day," I said.

"You have not seen the schedule."

"I know the schedule."

"You know yours."

I promised I would be there for the first night. Tarin did not ask for all three.

Across the lake, the clay cups had already begun to dry. Their brief work was finished. The frames remained, ordinary reeds against ordinary water.

Thunder reached the lake while we were pulling on our boots.

Cloud had gathered behind the western shoulder without either of us noticing. It came over the ridge as one dark wall. Tarin bundled the wet drying cloth around the commission notice; I packed our clothes without folding them. The first drops struck the leaves hard enough to shake dust from their undersides.

By the second switchback the path had become a channel. Tarin caught my wrist when the mud moved under one foot, and I returned the favor ten paces later. We were laughing when the rain still felt like inconvenience. Then lightning whitened the trees below us and the thunder arrived before we had finished counting.

“There,” I said.

The rock lip stood a little way off the path, shallow and dark beneath a rib of green-gray stone. I checked the slope above it for loose runoff and followed Tarin inside.

The rear floor was dry. Wind carried rain past the opening in silver cords. We sat shoulder to shoulder with our packs between our feet, sharing the drying cloth again because neither of us had brought anything sensible for weather that had not existed an hour earlier.

Tarin leaned back and shifted once. His hand passed over the stone behind him.

“Feel this.”

At shoulder height the surface was dull and smooth, not polished to a shine but worn softer than the broken face around it. I put my palm there. The fit was immediate: the height of a back, the place a waiting body would choose.

“I suppose this place sheltered a great many people before us,” he said. Rain filled the entrance, hiding the path. “And it will shelter a great many after. You can almost feel time here.”

“You can feel cold rock.”

“That too.”

He took my hand from the wall and held it between both of his until my fingers warmed. We watched the storm spend itself without deciding who had used the shelter or what they had called the mountain. When the thunder moved east, separate drops became audible again.

Tarin stepped out first and offered me his hand as though the ground beyond the overhang were a river crossing.

The path home shone under the clearing rain.

Thank you for reading

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Thank you for spending a little time with *Echoes*.

—Zsolt